

## **Dance Drama in the Mobile Theatre of Assam**

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### **Abstract:**

The mobile theatre of Assam is a unique art form that can rarely be found in any part of the world. The tradition of mobile theatre mainly the commercial form has already crossed the experience of long sixty years and within this period it has witnessed many changes as it is not based on some rigid framework. 'Mobile' the title itself means something not static rather movable. Mobile theatre is a makeshift theatre hall that can move from one place to another after an interval of three to four nights. Dance drama is an integral part of every mobile theatre. It is performed on stage just before the commencement of the main play. As a result, it creates an environment as well as prepare the mindset of the audience for enjoying the main play. Audience like dance dramas as it is full of music, dance and acting. Here in this article an attempt has been made to make a study on the dance drama in the mobile theatre of Assam.

**Keywords:** Mobile, Theatre, Dance, Drama, *Uparupaka*

### **Analysis:**

Dance drama is one of the most significant features of the mobile theatre of Assam. All the theatrical performances past and present to a large extent depend on dance and music. In ancient Indian dramaturgy the word *natya* is used to identify both drama and dance and it was classified under two main groups- the *rupaka* and the *uparupaka*. *Rupaka* is a perfect drama depicting one continuous theme and having the development of one emotion or *rasa*, and is therefore known as *rasabhinaya*. The *uparupaka* is mainly the *nritya* variety with a small theme or a number of isolated themes from the subject matter of the songs, which are sung and rendered into gestures by the dancers. An *uparupaka* mainly deals with bodily gestures and music which occupies a secondary position in *rupaka*. The distinctive feature of this variety is its stress on the expression of *bhava* as against *rasa* of the *rupaka* and are consequently known as *bhavabhinaya* or *padarthabhinaya*.

The dance drama of mobile theatre may be placed under the second head of the classification of *natya* i.e., *uparupaka*. There was a tradition among all the mobile theatre parties to prepare at least four dance dramas and perform one of them just before the commencement of the main play on stage. In the beginning in a dance drama small themes or stories or episodes mostly taken from the epics or *puranas* or sometimes from the folk tales depicting love, separation, meeting, expectancy, misunderstood etc. were performed by a group of dancers through appropriate gestures with interludes of pure dance or *nritya*. The themes of these dance dramas were mainly heroic in nature and it was sung by a team of musicians and singers. Usually in a dance drama the dancers were seen with colourful costumes and make up. They interpret the song with mime and gestures. Here the dramatic quality becomes more pronounced as the theme is a continuous one and many persons participate in the performance. Mobile theatres have continued this tradition of performing dance drama before the main play keeping all the tradition intact for a period of time.

Each theater group pays special attention to presenting dance dramas to the audience with sincerity and care. Theatre troupes like Nataraj, Purbajyoti, Asom Star, Aradhana, Lakhimi, Aparupa, Mukunda, Kohinoor, Awahan, Hengool, Sankardev, Bordoisila, Bhagyadevi,

Monalisa etc. have entertained numerous tastes through these dance dramas. Dance dramas like *Meghawali*, *Survijay*, *Luitkowari*, *Sonpokhili*, *Nimati Koina*, *Sripanchami*, *Hemantika*, *Awartan*, *Sonrsoleng*, *lakhimi*, *Apeswari* etc have paved the way for the writing of dance dramas on the stage of mobile theatre of Assam. Here it can be mentioned that in the beginning dance dramas based on the mythical stories are performed on stage. The themes of the plays, songs and dances of the pre-theatrical period were mainly epic and old-fashioned. The genre of dance drama based on mythological narratives in theatre gradually declined. However, in contrast, a number of dance plays are based on the immortal stories of classical Indian literature such as *Shakuntala*, *Urvashi*, *Swapna Basavadutta*, etc., as well as on the plays of Shakespeare and on the poems of Western literature such as Shelley, Keats, Byron is performed on stage. There is no doubt that theatre has played an exemplary role in bringing about new themes as well as changes in dance styles to a greater or lesser extent. The themes of folk life, cultural traditions, real-life love, separation, separation and reunion, the Panchatantra and the fairy tales of the old woman, are the subjects of dance drama.

But with the changing perspectives the theme of these dance dramas also takes a turn from epic to present day problems. Assam was once a very peaceful and comfortable state of the country but now the state is facing immense trouble. The problem of flood, insurgency and sometimes superstitious belief paralyzed the people. Besides the rising problem of AIDs and other deadly diseases like cancer create a terror in the mind of the innocent villagers. Though it is matter of shame to say, that a few tribal people in the state are killing each other in the name of *dainy hatya* (witch hunting) and it is clearly visible in the pages on the newspaper every now and then.

For all these reasons the producers of the mobile theatre felt it a crying need to perform dance dramas based on these stories of the day today life of Assam. Rural people like to enjoy these types of dance drama because it has easily motivated them through dance and acting in bringing a change in their attitude as well as in their activities. This is of course a novel concept to choose dance dramas as a means to create awareness among the common masses.

But it does not mean that the mobile theatres are completely showing disrespect to the traditional dance performances. Many times, they perform folk dances which are directly connected with the native.

The present trends of dance drama that one can see in mobile theatre was probably introduced in the mid of the twentieth century. The renowned lyricist Kirtinath Bardaloi in collaboration with Muktinath Bardaloi first wrote a novel dance drama in Assamese named *Basanti Abhisesh* and it was well received by the then contemporary audience. After that dance dramas like *Kapoukunwari* and *Sri Panchami* by Ananda Ch. Baruah; *Hemantika* by Badan Sarma; *Awartan* by Jogyaswar Sarma; *Sonar Saleng* and *Lakhimi* by Parbati Prasad Baruah and *Apeswari* by Prasannalal Choudhury established the path of performing dance dramas on stage. Today there is no mobile theatre without dance drama. A few of the most popular dance dramas are- *Nimati Koina*, *Son Pakhili*, *Sonit Kuwari* by Jyotiprasad Agarwala; *Sankardeva*, *Amrapali*, *Sitaharan*, *Kam Sendor Nil Siyal*, *Barluitaor Hatbauli*, *Uttaran* by Jatin Goswami, *Baghmanuh*, *Prabhati Hengool*, *Srimanta Sankardeva*, *Alibaba Sari Bandhu*, *Sonali Sutar Sadhu* by Garima Hazarika; *Sakuntala* by Hemanta Dutta; *Bhogalir Rang*, *Talsara Sewali*, *Asar Saki*, *Mrityudut*, *Jivanar Bate Bate* by Ajit Talukadar.

A few composers of dance dramas, like Jatin Goswami and Garima Hazarika are directly connected with the Indian Classical dance and music. While others namely Rabin Das, Uday

Das, Hem Baruah, Nagen Lahakar, Prafulla Haloi, Phulen Bharali, and Akshya Medhi are from different disciplines.

Dance dramas have always played a significant role in catching the attention of the audience as here one can find an aesthetic beauty of dance and music. Successful presentation of a dance drama also depends upon the dance directors. Compare to a full-length play though these dance dramas take a limited time of 30 to 40 minutes it carries artistic as well as aesthetic beauty. Among the successful dance directors of mobile theatres are- Rabin Das, Uday Das, Hem Baruah, Nagen Lahakar, Prafulla Haloi, Phulen Bharali, and Akshya Medhi.

Earlier in a *yatra* performance classical based dances namely- *gandharva kinnara*, *apeswari*, *nartaki*, *baiji*, *chokra nach*, *katig dance* etc, were performed either in the beginning or in the middle of the main play. Sometimes they also performed folk dances.

The classical and the folk dances have an aesthetic beauty. These classical and folk-dance varieties have to a large extent been revived and have become popular in towns and cities now-a-days. The modern stage craft, with its repertoire of scenic effects, lighting devices, costumes and make up has naturally brought in considerable modification in the traditional form of dance dramas. There can be no objection to the use of modern stage devices but it is essential that for proper presentation of traditional and folk-dance forms it need to be used with deep understanding and creative sympathy.

But it is pathetic to see that the modern dance performance in dance dramas miserably exposes the bankruptcy of our aesthetic sensibility. There is a growing tendency in the dance producers today to try and cover up the lack of dance technique with stage devices and showmanship, wherever possible. Little or no attention is given to the proper understanding of the themes selected. But it is painful to admit that the dance dramas performed by most of the theater parties today have lost their dignity. And that may be the reason for which critics of mobile theatres namely Pranjali Phookan suggested to delete or remove these dance dramas completely from mobile theatre, thinking it as a degenerating dance performance which affect the main play. However complete removal of dance dramas will not solve the problem of dramatic environment of the state and again it will badly affect the native culture of traditional dance performances. Therefore, a close scrutiny on the quality of dances, introduced in the dance dramas of mobile theatre should be conducted to find out its weak areas and to suggest for modification.

It is true that dance dramas have provided an aesthetic as well as an artistic environment in the state in one hand and give an exposure to so many hidden talents in the field of performances. It also helps the audience in setting up the tone for the main play.

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